

Drivers and Restrainers: Sociodrama of a Lewin Force Field

by Henry Price

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Abstract: Learning methods involving enactment are being increasingly utilised in the training and development of managers as an adjunct to formal information learning sessions. Their advantage lies in creating learning which integrates action, thought and feeling. This article describes the enactment of a Lewin Force Field as a means of understanding and changing organisational culture in a middle management public sector context.

The work of Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) occupies a seminal place in dynamic organisational theory. It was Lewin who is credited with the phrase group dynamics and who coined the famous dictum: There is nothing so practical as a good theory. Lewin developed one of the early systems approaches to understanding groups and organisations, and his Force Field Analysis succinctly summarises many of the key principles of systemic and cybernetic conceptions of social stability and change.

Essentially, Lewin conceived of every individual as occupying a field of psychological forces which create a "life space" consisting of both intrapsychic phenomena (hopes, fears, expectations, past experiences) as well as the physical and social context. As long as there is no change in the psychological field, there will be no change in the person's behaviour, a situation which Lewin called "quasi-stationary equilibrium". However within the field exist tensions between two sets of forces; the driving forces and the restraining forces. These opposing forces arrive at equilibrium; change in the field must occur either by strengthening the driving forces or undermining the restraining forces. Of these two broad options, Lewin believed that strengthening the driving forces would encourage a corresponding increase in the restraining forces' strength and thus increase psychological tension and anxiety. Preferably change occurs by weakening the restraining forces, which allows more mental

energy to become available to think creatively and achieve the task.

Lewin began to apply these ideas to social and organisational systems as well as individual, psychological systems. Thus in a team or an organisation, a point of equilibrium is achieved between the driving and restraining forces represented by things such as clarity of purpose, adequate resources, insufficient training and so on. It was also Lewin who conceived of the change process as consisting of three steps: Unfreeze, Move and Refreeze.

The use of the Lewin Force Field in management training is normally as a diagnostic tool which leads into a structure for planning change in the system. The initial diagnosis consists of identifying the driving and restraining forces which create the current equilibrium of the system. Planning for change is then done by addressing how these forces can be worked with to either weaken the Restrainers or strengthen the Drivers.

The usual steps are as follows:

1. Identify a particular organisational issue or problem which becomes the focus for diagnosis and problem solving.
2. Identify a polar spectrum in relation to this focal problem. A sociodramatic question may be used such as: what are the forces operating for and against increasing organisational effectiveness? Or, what are the forces working to resolve this problem and what are the forces operating as obstacles to resolution?
3. Forces which are pushing towards increased effectiveness or problem resolution are identified on one side of a line, represented by arrows pushing on the line. The length of the arrow can be drawn to reflect the presumed strength of

this particular force. These are called the Drivers.

4. Forces which are working against effectiveness are also identified and drawn pushing against the line from the other side. These are the Restrainers.

Thus far the Force Field is used as a method of diagnosing the cultural system, a snap shot at a given moment in time. In the second phase this diagnosis is taken as the departure point for a problem solving planning process. Each identified force can be looked as a possible target for change. The forces for effectiveness can be "powered up" and the forces against effectiveness can be undermined.

5. A list of actions is generated which could reduce or remove the Restrainers. Particular obstacles may be easier to intervene with than others, strategies can be brainstormed and developed into action plans.
6. The same process is done with strengthening the Drivers.
7. Finally, a change strategy is planned, usually with precise action steps specifying who will do what when, with what resources to effect change within the system.

The difficulty with such an approach in middle management training is that it remains an intellectual exercise usually removed from the context which it is addressing; the plans are developed in the distant situation of the training classroom and may or may not ever be implemented. In addition, unless the middle managers can gain access to power bases which enable the implementation of their ideas, the Force Field analysis remains simply

diagnostic, and does not lead to organisational change.

By contrast, it is possible to enliven the learning and immediacy of the exercise by enacting the identified forces, and thus first living in a representation of the organisational culture, and then working actively to change it in the immediate present. The enactment exercise thus operates as a microcosm of the larger

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cultural system of the whole organisation and participants in the exercise gain a direct experience of working to effect change or problem resolution. This is achieved by combining the insights of Lewin's Force Field with the powerful methods of experiential learning derived from sociodrama and the work of Jacob Moreno. The method can be used as in this case, as a microcosm of the whole organisation, or it can be used as an exercise to be done with an intact team, looking at their own team culture and its effectiveness.

This session took place as part of a Middle Management Development Program for a large public sector organisation. The group consisted of 16 middle managers from the central

office and several regional offices of the organisation. The participants were drawn from the upper middle management level of the organisation. Their functions included policy development and implementation, supervision of small teams of professional people, managing extensive budgets through public sector schemes such as the Financial Management Implementation Program, liaising with large and small private sector organisations, sometimes assessing such organisations for their contributions to the Australian economy. At the time of this session, the group had met for the sixth of a series of two day workshops covering a wide range of people management skills. This 2 day module was focusing on teams, group dynamics and organisational culture. The underlying themes for the workshop were leadership and constructive influence strategies.

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When the purpose of the exercise had become clear; to explore and look at ways of changing organisational effectiveness, and when people's emotional responses to their experience had strengthened, each person in the group was invited to

take on the role of a force for or against organisational effectiveness and to enact this role on the stage. The force being enacted by each individual was written on a label for easy recognition and the person invited to take a position on the stage, following the Force Field structure of opposing forces along an imaginary line. All 16 participants identified a force and one at a time took a position with the Drivers on one side and the Restrainers on the other. As each role player presented themselves they made a brief comment as to who they were and why they were representing this particular force.

The forces for effectiveness (Drivers) were

- Clear Purpose
- Leadership
- Productivity
- Adequate Resources
- Good Communication
- Enthusiasm
- Staff Training
- Close Liaison with Industry (their organisational clients)

The forces against effectiveness (Restrainers) identified were

- Cynicism
- Isolation
- Inadequate Resources
- Fear and Uncertainty
- Frustration
- Being Kept in the Dark
- Crisis Management
- Political Uncertainty (“changing the goal posts”)

If it is important that the exercise be seen to be a valid representation of the whole organisational culture, further discussion could ensue until the group is happy that all the key forces are being represented. In this exercise, the Director accepted the

forces as each person identified them. It was quite fortuitous that there were eight Drivers and eight Restrainers in the sociodrama.

The enactment followed the basic Force Field stages of diagnosis and

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change intervention. Participants were invited to consider how their particular role interacted with others on the stage prior to moving into action.

A free enactment was then begun. Participants were instructed to simply act their role as clearly as possible on the word “Go” and to freeze in exact position when the facilitator shouted “Freeze” or “Pause”. The first enactment was allowed to run for about ten minutes. Interviews were then conducted with the numerous subgroups which had formed during this period. The Facilitator asked questions of each subgroup as to their purpose, who they were interacting with and why, how they were feeling in relation to what was happening in the whole Force Field, and what were their observations about the dynamics of the whole

Force Field. In this diagnostic stage no emphasis was placed on solution or change intervention.

At the end of this first ten minute enactment the sociometry of the group looked somewhat as follows:

Isolation and Cynicism had formed a subgroup and were off on their own away from the others. Fear and Uncertainty was locked in a vigorous debate with Enthusiasm. Enthusiasm was clearly attempting to persuade Fear to give up and join the Drivers team. Staff Training was also joining Enthusiasm, but had been accused by Cynicism of being naive.

A powerful clique had been formed by Political Uncertainty, Inadequate Resources, and Being Kept in the Dark. Productivity had joined this group in a tentative attempt to persuade them of his importance, but was clearly in a weak minority position.

Leadership was wandering around looking quite bewildered and overwhelmed. She had an ally in the role of Good Communication but had not yet been able to assess the situation and develop any form of plan as to what to do and had meanwhile attracted the attention of Crisis Management who was busily proving his point by focusing on Leadership's confusion.

Clear Purpose was equally isolated at that moment, about to approach Kept in the Dark, but without any clear purpose as to why.

In this pause period we could thus all reflect on the cultural system as it was being enacted. We observed that polar opposites were tending to attract each other individually (for example Cynicism and Enthusiasm were strongly attracted) and were strongly tempted to argue, or move into a power struggle. We also observed that whereas the negative forces easily came together to create

powerful subgroups, the positive forces were divided and uncertain and thus impotent. Nobody had any sense of unity or alliance or team work. This tended to favour the Restrainers. Clearly Good Communication was not yet adequately functioning.

After this initial clarification of role and subgroup dynamics in the system, another free enactment period occurred. The facilitator had not yet encouraged any form of intervention. The second enactment period was restricted to five minutes, and the ensuing interview and discussion began to take on a solution and change focus.

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The sociodrama now moved into an intervention phase by the Director who focused primarily on Leadership. The group agreed that strong leadership was required yet interviews with

Leadership suggested that she was still overwhelmed by the confusion and predominance of negativity, and had no idea what to do. She had inadvertently formed an alliance with Fear and Uncertainty. This was leading her to remain isolated from her potential allies, and to try and tackle the powerful cliques such as that of Political Uncertainty, and Being Kept in the Dark, or that of Cynicism and Isolation on her own.

The Leadership role was coached by the Director. Who could she form alliances with to strengthen her position? Who represented the primary obstructive forces? How could they be negotiated with? Eventually Leadership realised that she had to form an alliance with Clear Purpose, and then create links (through Good Communication) to Productivity and Enthusiasm. This group acting as a team could then infiltrate the negative cliques and undermine their alliance and power.

A series of short enactments with coaching by the Director followed. This raised Leadership's ability to think strategically, to plan, and to develop assertion and negotiation skills. Eventually a circle began to form around the nucleus of the new alliance between Leadership and Purpose which began to draw others in. The subgroup of Cynicism and Isolation remained as outsiders. By this time these two had become strongly "in role" and had formed an alliance with Frustration. They were becoming annoyed at Leadership's inability to draw them in and get them involved. Further discussion and negotiation took place. By now a sense of team work was emerging among the Drivers. They were beginning to take their roles and interdependent relationships seriously. They began to recognise that each of them had particular skills and

abilities and therefore could be used precisely to achieve a given objective. Thus Enthusiasm's debate with Cynicism became more potent with backup by Leadership and Staff Training, ably assisted by Productivity.

This phase of enactment with coaching interventions by the Director to assist Leadership continued for some time. The sociodrama finished when two key trends emerged:

1. Solutions were now more rapidly identified and tested, new alliances were made. Structure and change plans began to emerge more fully and completely from the general chaos of the early enactment.
2. People wanted to change their roles, specially those negative roles which felt they had been adequately managed now began to become positive forces. Role labels were changed or refined to reflect this new outlook. This of course changed the entire system dynamic. As the roles changed, the Force Field changed and the organisational culture we had created changed.

The enactment was followed by a debriefing discussion with an increasing focus on what could be done in the actual organisation to increase effectiveness. A strong positive atmosphere pervaded the discussion as people began to see more precise and strategic ways of managing the culture without giving way to their own powerlessness. The participant who had played the role of Leadership in particular had come to several significant insights into power, strategic influence and the role of leadership within an organisation. Several of the strong negative roles which had held out in the exercise for a long time, particularly Cynicism,

required considerable debriefing.

The participants in this sociodrama gained an immediate living experience of an organisational culture structured by the Force Field conception. As an active force within the field they could directly experience both the impact of the field on themselves and their impact on other forces within the field. They could clearly observe the nature of the interactive patterns which evolved in the culture and consider from an immediate point of view what to do about this. Further, within the format of the exercise, they were able to test out influence strategies and experience immediate consequences. In this way the enactment became also a role training exercise in team building and influence. Participants were also able to observe Lewin's principle that weakening the Restrainers tended to create change more easily, and that the Drivers could best be strengthened by working together as a team rather than engaging in individual power struggles. The sociodrama considerably enlivened their learning experience and their understanding of organisational culture.

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